

Denver speeds up play: Drastic but effective measures

BY PETER BLAIS

Four years ago it took almost 5-1/2 hours to play a round of golf at Wellshire Golf Course in Denver, Colo.

That was before the City Council voted to begin timing players and allowing management to remove stragglers from the Donald Ross course.

The result?

Forty-five minutes were shaved off the average round, according to City Director of Golf Dennis Wong. Golfers who had avoided Wellshire because of slow play began returning. And, most importantly, at least to the Mile High City's pocketbook, speedier play has meant a 20-percent jump in rounds and revenue.

Denver's experiment represents a possible solution to the slow play and crowded conditions that have

accompanied golf's recent growth and threaten its future.

Fifty-five percent of golfers surveyed by the National Golf Foundation said their courses were too crowded when they wanted to play. And one-fourth said crowded courses (a problem involving slow play and course supply) kept them from playing more often.

Golf managers have tried subtle changes to speed up play — more rangers, easier tee markers and pin positions, mandatory use of golf cars, education on the importance of speedier play.

Rarely have they resorted to the radical step of timing players and removing the slower ones, partly because of golfers' reported dislike of the system. Seventy percent of golfers opposed time limits, according to the NGF.

But something had to be done in

Denver, particularly at Wellshire. With its tight fairways and heavy demand, an average round at Wellshire was taking an hour and 40 minutes longer to play than the NGF's national figure of three hours and 50 minutes.

A late-1986 brainstorming session involving city course superintendents, pros and the golf director resulted in the Denver policy, explained Wong.

Beginning in 1987 at Wellshire and John F. Kennedy Municipal Golf Course, tee times were stamped on a group's scorecard at the first tee. The card was checked at the fourth hole at Wellshire, and stamped again at the ninth at both courses. If the elapsed time after the ninth was more than the recommended two hours and 20 minutes, the group was encouraged to speed up play. Course personnel

also had the City Council-approved right, though it has been exercised less often in recent years, to ask the group to leave with no refund.

Wong estimated a dozen groups, mostly beginners, were asked to pack their bags that first summer. Course personnel usually suggested they play the city's par-3 course and return when they had a better grasp of the game. That advice was usually well received, said Wong.

"We timed every group to keep people aware of where they should be on the course. A lot of beginners and novices simply weren't aware. Our intention wasn't to remove people, just to keep them moving," said Wong.

Wong said experienced players occasionally balked at the time limit.

"The mens' clubs sometimes felt we were pushing them around the

course," he said. "With all the TV coverage, they'd see a pro standing over a putt forever and think they had to do the same. We have all kinds of literature from the PGA discouraging slow play that we show them. And we tell them about the penalties for slow play on the PGA Tour, how it can be a lot of money out of a pro's pocket if he is penalized a stroke or two."

The occasional complaint aside, the vast majority favored timing players, said Wong. The program was so successful, it was extended to all seven city-owned courses.

Very rarely is a player asked to leave now that golfers are familiar with the system. People are coming back to Denver's courses, particularly Wellshire.

"Word got out that you can play it in 4-1/2 hours or less, again," said Wong.

Casas

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school. None have expressed any desire to follow in their father's footsteps.

"That's probably my fault," said Casas. "I started a policy that no relatives could work at the golf courses. I kind of regret that now. They might have been interested, but Paul was just 7 and Chris 5 at the time. I never really thought about them working for me."

If they had, they probably would have enjoyed it. Employee turnover at the Hunter courses is nil. Hunter credits Casas.

"Paul's very loyal in his family, social, religious and business life," said Hunter. "He's the same way with his employees. He treats them the way he'd like to be treated."

"He's also bilingual. That's very helpful since some of our employees are Mexican nationals who have

recently become citizens. He helps them with their personal problems and offers guidance with things like buying a home."

Hunter also credits Casas with keeping a tight grip on the company's pocketbook. "Paul saves us money all the time by treating the company's assets as if they were his own," he said.

The latest threat to the company's bottom line is the water bill. Casas

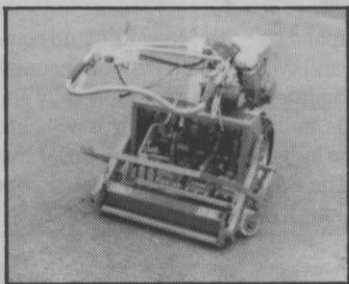
said the price of water has increased eight-fold at Sandpiper over the last 10 years, from \$14,000 in 1980 to \$115,000 this year. The price for one unit (748 gallons) of irrigation water ranges from \$1.01 at Sandpiper to \$2.04 at San Geronimo.

Casas has revised his watering schedule and coverage practices in response to the price increase and the 15 percent cutback in supply imposed by the state because

of the current drought. Last year's 4.35 inches of rainfall was about a third of the average precipitation rate and represented the fourth straight year of drought conditions.

He is also involved in negotiations between the local water and sanitation districts involving the use of effluent on golf courses. With potable water rates likely to rise, Casas sees effluent as a way to keep water costs down.

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